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College-bound cowboys: The Los Alamos Ranch School
Before the wartime lab, Los Alamos was home to a boarding school
By Patty Templeton, Archivist, [National Security Research Center](#)

Summer's over and the school year's soon to start. What's a kid to do? Go West, young man! Escape the city that is "making you soft" and learn self-reliance from the western U.S. of A. – or so advertised the ranch school movement in America from roughly 1900-1960.

This educational movement included Los Alamos. Before being developed into a wartime lab to create atomic weapons, the mesa was home to one of the most prominent and pricey ranch schools in America.

The Los Alamos Ranch School (LARS), located in what is today's downtown, was founded in 1917 by Detroit businessperson and outdoors enthusiast Ashley Pond II. Boy Scouts training was integrated into a college preparatory curriculum. Classes fortified the mind while rigorous outdoor activity strengthened the body in a setting made mythic to many Americans by Western movies, dime novels, pioneer journals and tourism advertising.

"Western ranch schools became a valued resource for the education of the elite because in the American mind, the West lacked the hindrances of inherited privilege and other cultural and social restraints that inhibited youth from becoming 'self-made.' Its rugged environment forced adolescents to prove themselves, and cowboys and ranchers served as role models of self-made individuals," according to *Prep School Cowboys*.

A day in the life

At LARS, class sizes were small, usually three to four students, with yearly enrollment never exceeding 48 boys, ages 12 to 18.

The curriculum emphasized hands-on work, bodily health and community stewardship. Students wore uniforms that mirrored Boy Scout apparel: khaki shorts, a khaki or wool flannel shirt, a Stetson hat and bandana. A typical weekday schedule was

- 6:30 a.m. wake and drink a glass of water
- 15 minutes of exercise in the yard
- breakfast then room inspection
- 7:45 a.m. - 12:55 p.m. college preparatory classes
- 1 p.m. lunch followed by a short rest period
- afternoon recreation, including sports, trail rides, Scouting activities and community work
- 6 p.m. supper followed by a half-hour of listening to a professor read and study time
- 8:15 p.m. bedtime for younger boys
- 9 p.m. lights out for older boys

Saturdays contained all-day (sometimes overnight) trail rides and Sundays had a Scouting meeting.

Students shared a room for dressing, studying and personal storage. Students and non-married professors slept on an outdoor, screened porch. Heavy canvas shades keep out snow.

The Lack of Women at LARS

Girls were barred admission and just two female faculty members were hired for a short time. The only females at LARS were a small group of professors' wives, ranchers' wives, their children, an occasional matron and the school nurse.

According to *Los Alamos the Ranch School Years 1917-1943*, the school "tolerated faculty wives," but viewed them as "distracting." The women the school administration "liked best were those who didn't 'butt in' but who stayed in the background, invisible but available when called upon to help or to teach boys the finer social skills."

Pricey Tuition, Notable Alumni

In 1920, LARS cost \$1,800. By 1928, tuition increased to \$2,400, which is the 2021 equivalent of more than \$37,000. As such, students were mostly from wealthy families, including owners of large corporations, like Colgate and Hilton.

Famous alumni include John Crosby, the founder of the Santa Fe Opera; Roy Chapin, CEO of American Motors; John Shedd Reed, president of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway; and author Gore Vidal.

For many students, LARS was, "a strange and adventurous new world that would fill [us] with the keenest and most delightful memories of a lifetime," former student Earl Kieselhorst, said of his 1919 summer.

Others, like future writer William S. Burroughs, hated it. *Los Alamos The Ranch School Years 1917-1943*, noted that he, "chafed under the school discipline and several times was in trouble for use of drugs and alcohol."

Student Stirling Colgate was about 17 years old in the school's final days when he recognized two visitors as nuclear scientist Ernest Lawrence and theoretical physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, even though they used assumed names. In *American Prometheus*, Colgate recalled, "Those two characters showed up, Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones, one wearing a porkpie hat and the other a normal hat, and these two guys went around as if they owned the place." Colgate would later attain a PhD in nuclear physics from Cornell University, work on the hydrogen bomb with Edward Teller and study supernovae at the Lab.

School's out forever

In support of the Manhattan Project, the Army wanted to buy LARS. The school wanted to negotiate a long-term lease, hoping it could continue after the war. According to *Los Alamos The*

Ranch School Years 1917-1943, acting headmaster, Fermor Church, said, “We rebuffed all advances ... until a letter from the Secretary of War left us no choice.”

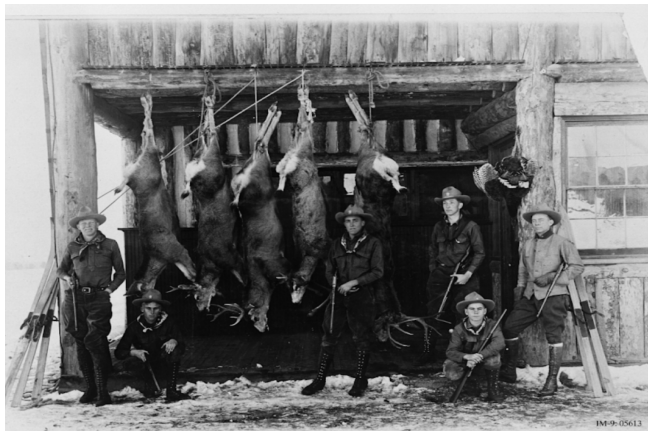
After haggling, the school accepted \$440,000 (the 2021 equivalent of more than \$6.8 million dollars), based on the Army Corps of Engineers’ appraisal. This included over 700 acres, all buildings, 60 horses, two tractors, two trucks, 50 saddles, 800 cords of firewood, 25 tons of coal and the 1,600-book library, according to *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*.

In January 1943, the Los Alamos Ranch School awarded diplomas to its last four graduates, including Colgate. In February, construction of Lab facilities and the secret city began.

Looking for more LANL history? Check out [stories and photos](#) based on the collections from the Lab’s National Security Resource Center.

IMAGES

---All images have been approved by John Moore. He checked the student photo and said that the NSRC does have a negative for it.



Caption: Los Alamos Ranch School students after a hunting trip on the over 700 acres of school grounds.

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Caption: Before the Lab began as the top-secret Project Y to create the atomic bomb, Los Alamos was home to a few homesteaders and a boys' boarding school. Students and unmarried professors would sleep on one of the buildings' outdoor porch year-round. Photos of LARS and the early Lab are part of the collections in the National Security Resource Center.

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Caption: The Fuller Lodge at the Los Alamos Ranch School was designed by architect John Gaw Meem. Made from 771 handpicked ponderosa pines and aspen trees, the lodge was a

student dining hall. Later, Manhattan Project scientists and staff would use Fuller Lodge for town hall meetings, dining and parties.

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Caption: The Technical Area of Project Y during the Manhattan Project is shown here circa 1945, two years after the last Los Alamos Ranch School students vacated the premises. In the back left, the roof peak of Fuller Lodge is in view. In the back right, one of the former school structures is visible behind the trees.

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